The social project: Housing postwar France

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"A tour de force on the French suburbs and the utopian imaginaries that made them into the twentieth century's largest social experiment. *The Social Project* is a must-read for anyone interested in the 'other Paris' of the suburban periphery and a brilliant contribution to the urban and architectural history of the French suburbs and to understanding the social ambitions of architecture."

—Rosemary Wakeman, Fordham University

"*The Social Project* does important work in uncovering and making available the complex projects, motives, dreams, and politics that made possible the vast expansion of urbanism in postwar France. It reminds us with force and insight that today's despair and gloominess about such projects was not always the case nor were the current dreary outcomes inevitable."

—Paul Rabinow, University of California, Berkeley

In the three decades following World War II, the French government engaged in one of the twentieth century's greatest social and architectural experiments: transforming a mostly rural country into a modernized urban nation. Although these postwar suburban environments of towers, slabs, and megastructures are often seen as a single utopian blueprint gone awry, Kenny Cupers demonstrates that their construction was instead driven by the intense aspirations and anxieties of a broad range of people. *The Social Project* unearths three decades of architectural and social experiments centered on the dwelling environment as it became an object of modernization, an everyday site of citizen participation, and a domain of social scientific expertise. Beyond state intervention, this new regime of knowledge production made postwar modernism mainstream. The first comprehensive history of these wide-ranging urban projects, this book reveals how housing in postwar France shaped both contemporary urbanity and modern architecture.

Kenny Cupers is assistant professor of architectural history at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. He is coauthor of *Spaces of Uncertainty* and editor of *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture*.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS
Printed in U.S.A.
Cover photograph: Emile Aillaud, La Grande Borne. Fonds Aillaud. SIAF/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XXe siècle. Reproduced with permission of Fabio Rieti.
Cover design by Laura Shaw Design

ISBN 978-0-8166-8965-1

Cupers

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MINNESOTA

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INTRODUCTION

BUILDING THE *BANLIEUE*

Even its public transport has a different name. To visit the other Paris, you take not the metro but a different network of regional express trains. You cross underneath the *péripherique*, the circular highway that has replaced Paris's nineteenth-century city wall but has the same effect of demarcating the center from the rest. After this threshold, still the official city limit of Paris, the familiar city quickly peters out through the window. Then suddenly, the other Paris—perhaps the truly modern one—appears. Housing slabs and tower blocks in bright white, daring pink, and drab gray. Palaces for the people, giant but mostly less than glamorous. Ten-story pyramids imitating Mediterranean hilltop villages. Expansive multilevel plazas and exuberantly designed playgrounds. Graffitied concrete and postmodernist cladding. Well-intentioned community centers and monstrous shopping-mall megastructures. Highways, parking lots, and patches of green space, large and small, among it all. In the popular imagination this landscape, the unplanned result of planned developments, is the opposite of all that "Paris" stands for today. It is the city tourists rarely get to see but where most Parisians actually live. The situation is not all that different in Bordeaux, Marseille, Lille, or Grenoble. Their suburban landscapes, which make up so much of contemporary France, in some ways still seem to be the product of another society, altogether different from the one that produced the grand boulevards and monumental architecture of so many French cities. From an inner-city Paris that seems ever more set in its ways, the suburban excursion is uncanny. Although a new world has materialized where sixty years ago there was little more than fields of cabbage and a few cottages, the lingering sensation is that of visiting the puzzling remains of a long-lost civilization whose aesthetics no longer has a voice.

This new world has its equivalent in paper. The vast proliferation of paperwork that made possible France's frenzied urbanization has been poured into a subterranean city of dusty boxes in a far-flung suburb beyond the end of the commuter rail line.[1] This is France's National Archive for the postwar period, housing a greater volume of documents than was produced in all other periods of French history combined. With a uniquely French fervor for bureaucracy, the archive's paperwork breathes the now outmoded ambitions that shaped much of the urban landscape that flashes by the train window. Housing for all. A rational organization of the national territory. Universal access to public services of all sorts. A modern nation of socially mixed neighborhoods. Even if such rhetoric was accompanied by far less lofty motives, it was unparalleled in its consequences. The French postwar suburbs constitute one of the twentieth century's largest, and perhaps least understood, social and architectural experiments.

This book is about the making of that world. In less than three decades after World War II, France transformed from a largely rural country with an insufficient and outdated housing stock into a highly modernized urban nation. This transformation was in large part the result of the massive production of publicly funded housing projects and state-planned New Town developments on the outskirts of existing cities. The sheer speed and unprecedented scale of these developments—tens of thousands of housing units rising simultaneously—makes the interwar modernist housing of the New Frankfurt look almost as quaint as the prewar garden cities on which it was modeled. The upshift in housing production during the postwar decades was therefore not just a quantitative shift but a qualitative one. It changed the role of modern architecture at large. During these few decades of the twentieth century, architecture undertook a social project both unprecedented at the time and unparalleled since. Modern architecture did not belong to an avant-garde of architects alone; it was shared and shaped by government officials, construction companies, residents' associations, developers, and social scientists alike. And yet, despite such broad ground, its logic and language were remarkably consistent. Never before were modernization and modernism so pervasive and so closely allied, nor would they ever be again. Never before was modern architecture built on such a massive scale and at such a frantic pace, shaping the urban landscape at large. And never before was an entire generation so aware of how much better off they were than their parents—measured first of all in the social and material realm of everyday life. As the older agendas of social reform gave way to rationalization under the aegis of the state, architecture participated in the spatial organization of welfare and progress. The central argument of this book is that modern architecture and postwar urbanization in France developed in tandem, through a process of continual experimentation centered on everyday life as a target of modernization and an emerging domain of expertise.

It is hard not to read the resulting built environments through the lens of current events. In recent decades, a significant part of the housing stock from this period has undergone

physical degradation and has gradually been left to those with no choice to live elsewhere. As predominantly white middle-class families left collective housing in favor of suburban single-family homes, poor families, particularly those of African origin, moved in. Many of the larger collective housing areas today—especially those built in the 1950s and 1960s—suffer from high youth unemployment and crime rates. More than seven hundred of them have been officially marked as "urban problem areas" by the French government, stigmatizing more than five million inhabitants, predominantly from ethnic minorities. The continuing unrest in a relatively small number of these deprived neighborhoods—the riots of November 2005 and 2007 being the most notorious—has become symbolic for the country's (sub)urban crisis. Critical observers in France and abroad have decried this condition as a blatant sign of social and racial apartheid. Two images, whose opposition reinforces their symbolic weight, continue to dominate our understanding of urban France: on the one hand, the monumental splendor and richness of Paris's historic city center, and, on the other, the poverty and hopelessness of its suburban landscapes of tower blocks and slabs. By the early 1980s, less than 16 percent lived in the city itself.[2] The majority inhabits the sprawling suburbs known as the *banlieue*. Other French cities mirror this pattern.

Despite its national particularities, suburban France is inscribed in a wider global narrative about modern architecture and state planning. During the postwar decades of unprecedented economic expansion—roughly between 1945 and 1975—large-scale urban renewal, mass housing estates, and ambitious New Town projects proliferated not only in France but also in places as diverse as Britain, Scandinavia, the Middle East, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Despite, or perhaps because of, the global front lines of the Cold War, these regions shared remarkably similar ideas about the virtues of planning and mass housing. With important exceptions, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the overwhelming majority of the environments that resulted from these assumptions now appear as relics of long-lost convictions: the belief in modern architecture as a vehicle of social progress, and the confidence in the government to provide directly for individuals and families. A few decades after their construction, mass housing developments such as Pruitt-Igoe, Sarcelles, Bijlmermeer, and Aylesbury, came to represent a social crisis that cut deep into the public consciousness of their respective societies.

The dominant perception, among scholars and the public alike, is that postwar housing is therefore a monstrous human catastrophe. Many have laid the blame with the architects and planners who drafted the schemes. How could they conceive of siting near-identical towers and slabs, some of them hundreds of meters long and fifteen stories high, in vast areas of ill-defined open space generally disconnected from their surroundings? With Le Corbusier usually taking the blame, three decades of building production have become synonymous with modernism's failure: its rationalistic hubris, its inflexible and inhumane treatment of urban

space, and its outright denial of people's needs and aspirations. Architects and planners themselves actually participated in such portrayals: their often-virulent critiques of monotonous housing schemes were not without self-interest. Physical determinism became convenient once again. If the origin of social malaise lay in design, so would its solution. Newer architects and planners could thus write themselves a future by demonizing what their older colleagues had produced. The problem with handing out this kind of blame is not that it would incriminate the wrong culprits. Rather, it reduces the history of a significant part of the urbanized world to a singular error. Meanwhile, shortsightedness has helped to legitimize the current policy of massive demolition. The famous image of an imploding Pruitt-Igoe—the housing development near Saint Louis, Missouri, that led the architect and critic Charles Jencks to proclaim the death of modern architecture—stands as a symbol here for what has become the clearest way out of mass housing.[3] Since the first demolitions in the 1970s, the decision to destroy these places, rather than to improve them, has gained purchase. This ignores the fact that only in few cases does such action accomplish anything more than simply displacing the social problem of poverty. Meanwhile, the products of the welfare state's golden age are disappearing even before their making has been properly understood.

Architectural history has done little so far to challenge this state of affairs. Reducing the history of mass housing to that of architectural discourse, English-language scholarship has continued to neglect the complex genesis of what are often dismissed as mediocre projects. At best, they are watered-down versions of a once-genius idea, at worst, equally thoughtless iterations of a revolting idea. But how can the forms and concepts in Le Corbusier's sketches of the 1920s, or the discourse of a self-appointed elite of architects such as the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) possibly suffice to explain a process of urbanization that has literally changed the face of the earth? Mass housing remains an excluded topic in architectural history because it falls through the gaps of the discipline.[4] It is neither a vernacular expression of local culture nor easily taken up in the canon of "high" architecture. Mass housing developments are often pervasively global and yet nationally specific, never quite unique nor completely alike. It is no wonder they challenge the norms of the discipline—despite being modern architecture's most widespread manifestation to date.

In many respects, the French suburbs epitomize these contradictions. In no other country were modern architecture and state planning so strongly united that they shaped both the image of contemporary urbanity and our understanding of the social ambitions of architecture at large. This convergence cannot be explained by the predominance of a single political ideology. France was midway between the Soviet bloc, where housing was a direct expression of Communist ideology, and the United States, where it never became the dominant model of urban development. Postwar housing in France was shaped both by the workings of a centralized state and by the social dynamics of liberal capitalism. During the *trente glorieuses*,

the three decades of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity after World War II, mass housing was France's preeminent tool of national modernization.[5] Its cornerstone was the modern standard four-room apartment, resulting from mass production and typified in France as the "F4"—just as the nuclear family was to be the backbone of the nation. Despite the increasing engagement of private capital and the gradual liberalization of planning procedures, the centralized state remained the country's main urbanist, de jure and de facto, until well into the 1970s.[6] This period is consequently known as "the era of the technocrats," a time in which the country was steered by a class of leaders with a penchant for authoritarianism and technocracy inherited from wartime and colonialism.[7] The pervasive towers and slabs on the horizon of metropolitan France today stand as symbols of a regime bedeviled by a history of violence breeding violence.

This book sidesteps the morass of myth, symbol, and representation in which this history has been buried. Without dismissing the social and political debates that some of these places continue to generate—and should generate—it examines the complex construction of the *banlieue* on its own terms.[8] If accepted wisdom about this topic relies on overarching judgment—public housing is a necessary good; public housing always fails—this study historicizes such normative approaches.[9] Against the prevailing impulse to blame architectural modernism, its principles, typologies, and materials for the so-called failure of public housing, the study situates such physical determinism as itself part of the historical development of mass housing and New Towns. Causalities between built form and social life were discursively constructed and contested, not only by architects and experts but also by inhabitants and various other publics. The aesthetic monotony of facades, construction methods resistant to interior alterations, technically deficient building materials, and insufficient sound insulation are just a few of these materials that became active when harnessed by specific actors to specific ends—tenants and owners, sociologists or policy makers. In short, to understand the making of the French suburbs we need to favor situated agency over abstract forces and contingency over determinism.

Contrary to accepted wisdom, this perspective reveals that the postwar city in France is more than the product of a single utopian blueprint gone awry. But the idea that French urbanism amounts to a poor imitation of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation in Marseille continues to be a persistent fiction in both popular and scholarly accounts. Even if formally there are some striking resemblances between France's mass housing and certain CIAM projects, they cannot be reduced to it under the blanket category of "influence." Even if discussions between Corbusian modernists and urbanists such as Gaston Bardet reveal the ideological struggle over the proper shape of French reconstruction, they do little to explain the circumstances that informed mass housing "on the ground." What were the conditions that supported architects' and planners' participation in these projects across France? What shared ways of

thinking and doing made this massive architectural production possible over decades of social, economic, and political change? If French postwar urbanization was driven by economic growth and guided by state bureaucracy, the actual shapes it took were not predetermined. Why and how were things built the way they were? How did planners know and decide what to build, and for whom? What factors outside of the domain of architecture made architects' ideas convincing to those in charge? How did the public receive them, and how did people occupy these environments, once built? To answer these questions one must understand how architectural ideas hybridized as they trickled down and building transformed as it proliferated. This is a study therefore of how architecture *moves*—not just in architectural discourse but through government and civil society institutions, social science, and popular media.

The French suburbs were not built in a day or according to a singular principle. With their designs and experiments being carried out at often unprecedented scales, architects and planners were engaged more than ever in the large-scale reorganization and modernization of everyday life. But this hardly implied a unified agenda or one-off implementation. Motives competed and projects conflicted. Problems with everyday life in France's mass housing and New Town areas did not just appear in the last decades. Female depression and youth delinquency were only the most sensational of issues reported by journalists and social scientists at the height of construction during the 1960s. Such concerns accompanied rather than succeeded the rapid urbanization of France after World War II. During this period, architecture was not only planned and built, but also inhabited, criticized, studied, modified, and revised. Mass housing was not just produced but also consumed. And these processes of production and consumption became intimately intertwined. Instead of the prevailing assumption of triumphant rise and spectacular fall, this period was one of accumulative experimentation and continual revision. Without an embedded account of such processes, the course of architectural modernism cannot be understood.

The kind of history that can take account of such complexity and interaction is necessarily a hybrid one. This study in fact contributes to a broader shift in architectural history, moved by a rejection of the limited focus on discourse, representation, and authored work. It advances instead an explicitly relational history of architecture that includes multiple disciplines, mainstream practice, and the built environment at large. Although architecture and urban planning are now almost entirely different disciplines, with the latter squarely located in social science, that was not the case in the postwar decades. Especially in mid-twentieth-century France, architecture and urban planning were often indistinguishable under the rubric of *urbanisme*. This period's architectural history therefore cannot be written without taking account of urban planning, and most important, the dynamics of the postwar city more generally. As such, this study stands on the shoulders of three distinct bodies of scholarship: histories of

postwar architectural modernism, an impressive body of mostly French-language scholarship in urban history, and an emerging history of the social sciences.[10]

This study has no pretensions to be a social history "from below." By focusing on the role of institutions, buildings, concepts, and organizations as much as the agency of individuals, it trains a hybrid lens that follows the composite production of the built environment itself. In the case of postwar France, that environment was both cause and result of interaction between the realms of design, construction, inhabitation, and scientific study. Such interactions, for which the state supplied a central platform, shaped the encounter between modern architecture and social science.[11] The social project that linked them was neither static nor univocal. It evolved from standard housing provision to lively neighborhoods, participatory planning, social integration, urban diversity, and the right to the city. And it changed under the influence of rising middle-class prosperity, the increasingly contested role of government in housing production, and inhabitants' growing expectations of agency in the shaping of their everyday lives.

The social agenda of interwar modernism—architecture as the vehicle for a new, egalitarian society—was reversed in the postwar decades. Architecture was now to facilitate societal changes already under way. This was in many ways a far more complex task, involving an increasingly complex set of actors and institutions. As modernism turned mainstream, the production of the built environment in postwar France went hand in hand with an unprecedented expansion of expertise. The production of specialized knowledge accompanying material production marked a revolution in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Architecture has rarely been considered as an integral part of this development. Its role has too often been reduced to the artistic, utopian, and paper projects of the 1950s and 1960s.[12] Yet, postwar architectural modernism was about more than radicalism and technophilia; architectural experimentation was a determining factor in, and the result of, an unprecedented regime of knowledge production.

Concerning areas as diverse as social life, building technology, and economic policy, a growing body of empirical knowledge provided architecture's intellectual context between the 1950s and 1970s. It brought architects, policy makers, developers, social scientists, and resident associations together as they experimented with urban planning principles, prefabricated construction, modern housing typologies, collective amenities, and commercial centers, from the first mass housing projects until the fundamental reorientation of the mid-1970s. Contrary to our contemporary intuition, the prevalence of technocratic expertise and functionalist doctrine at this time did not exclude "humanist" concerns with the social and the desire to accommodate inhabitants' diversity of needs. Such concerns were in fact shared by leftist, populist, and antimodernist critics and the makers of the mass housing projects they so vehemently critiqued. What did change over time was the way planners and critics came to actually understand inhabitants, their everyday lives, and their needs.

To chart this evolution, this study takes account of three perspectives. First of all, the book situates architecture in a regime of production and consumption resulting from both state-led modernization and liberal capitalism. This fundamentally shaped the way experts—including architects—approached inhabitants, who became "users" at the crossroads of technocracy and consumerism. The second and concomitant line of inquiry in this study is how the course of postwar architecture and urbanism was shaped by specialized knowledge. If housing and urbanization evolved as an experimental process in which the realms of construction and habitation were in continual interaction, the domain of the social sciences came to supply the essential knowledge assuring these exchanges. Third, this study offers an alternative framework for analyzing the politics and agency of architecture, beyond both the representational narrative of art and architectural history and the master narratives of draconian modernization and heroic contestation found in much urban history.

The User: Technocracy Meets Consumerism

French housing, both before and after 1968, was in many ways less about its inhabitants than about those who spoke and built in their name. It involved political elites and government administrators, large semipublic and private developers and construction companies, modern yet mainly Beaux-Arts–trained architects, scientific experts, and engineers in large consultancy firms—and increasingly, local and national associations of inhabitants, tenants, and consumers, assembled under the rubric of *usagers* or "users." This term not only emerged "in action," through the reactions of individuals and groups to large-scale urban development, but was also constructed as a register of understanding. The white nuclear family with a male breadwinning father, stay-at-home mother, and two or three children remained the central reference point for many architects and policy makers—almost all male—until well into the 1960s. At the same time, people also pushed back against such racial and gendered definitions—sometimes reinforcing them, as when housewives collaborated with policy makers on kitchen designs, sometimes subverting them, as when an Algerian construction worker moved into an "F4." Whether as an abstract universal, a statistical entity identified with the nuclear family, a normative figure subject to modernization, an active participant of neighborhood life, a free consumer, or a protesting militant, the user was a category of policy and design as much as an agent of the built environment. This category was fundamental both in the course of mass housing estates or *grands ensembles* and in the *villes nouvelles,* France's official program of New Towns officially launched in 1965.

Situated ambivalently between the mass subject and the individual—and between the realms of citizenship and private consumption—this particular type was in fact emblematic of architecture and urbanization in postwar Europe more generally.[13] As a term, *usager* first

appeared in the *Petit Robert* dictionary during the 1930s, referring to "a person who uses (a public service, the public domain)."[14] This definition implied the responsibility of the state to furnish goods and services in expanding domains of social and personal life, at a moment in history when social welfare and modern state planning were in a crucial stage of formation.[15] This approach then became dominant during the "golden age" of the welfare state in postwar Europe, when governments became involved with their citizens' well-being in novel ways. From natalism to mental health and cultural policy, administration seemed to bear no longer just on subjects but on their very subjectivity. This was exactly the kind of shift that guided Michel Foucault's search for a definition of power beyond discipline, as the organization of social and personal life in general.[16] But, contrary to the conspiratorial tone of many subsequent interpretations, the new type of government was hardly experienced as a dark machination. In the eyes of policy makers and citizens alike, the function of the state was no longer just to rule but to serve.[17] Most accurately, perhaps, the state would rule by serving.

The figure of the user typified this new role of government. Neither simply a consumer (an independent actor in the private realm of the market) nor simply a citizen (subject to the state and thus in direct political relation to it through rights and obligations), the user was relatively autonomous from the state, yet at the same time linked to it as beneficiary of "public service." This kind of state provision was based on rights and thus on the basis of estimated need rather than individual want. Calculations were devoid of individuality, and in particular of race and ethnicity—absent categories in an otherwise meticulous bureaucratic system of social classification.[18] At the same time, as this study demonstrates, state provision was increasingly understood as a consumer relationship, whether defined individually or as "collective consumption."

The figures of citizen and consumer were indeed often conflated in a country marked by the welding of state-led modernization with a mass consumer culture grafted upon the American model.[19] If the United States was a Consumers' Republic, a term coined by Lizabeth Cohen for a regime in which "the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest,"[20] France was a "Users' Republic" in which mass consumption was guided by an elaborate system of state planning and welfare provision. French consumer culture was shaped by conflict between the European emphasis on "collective consumption" as a social right and the American notion of the sovereign consumer whose satisfaction was guaranteed by the free market. The authority of the French state in consumption led observers such as Henri Lefebvre to speak of a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption."[21] National economic planning, with its roots in the 1930s, its experimental phase during World War II, and its maturation under Jean Monnet and the Marshall Plan made France a "planning state" in which the government had a pervasive presence in everyday life. The ambiguity of the user—partly citizen, partly consumer—was constituent of this intertwining of state, market, and society that marks the postwar decades in France.

The built environment was not only shaped by this condition; it also helped shape it. In the first postwar years, the government prioritized infrastructure and heavy industries, but when rapid urban and demographic growth exacerbated the housing shortage, it assumed unprecedented responsibilities in housing production. Far exceeding its prior involvement in social housing and national reconstruction, by the mid-1950s the state began to promote the mass production of standardized dwelling units in large collective housing estates. With this development, architecture was granted a prominent role in the modernization of postwar society. At the same time, social engineering was restricted by the confines of a liberal capitalist democracy, the impact of private development, and the dynamics of mass consumerism. This tension brought the unknowable universe of the inhabitant to the heart of French urban and architectural expertise. It triggered new questions not only for planners and policy makers, but also for architects, who were now faced with a new, anonymous client in their design briefs. This user was to postwar architecture what the "modern subject" was to interwar modernism.

Housing was more than a straightforward service such as postal delivery or electricity. It was claimed as a basic citizens' right, increasingly built as a modern consumer product, and meanwhile remained a complex feature of personal identity, collective belonging, and social life. The state did not refrain from intervening in these various aspects. The democratization of rights, goods, and services that was one of the primary goals of French welfare generated a continuum between the public realm and the private domains of market and household. Urbanism was a key factor in this thoroughgoing reorganization of public and private. When inhabitants—organized in local associations and national civil society organizations—formulated demands for participation, they did so in the name of an all-encompassing user, more than as only tenants, citizens, or consumers alone. Mass housing and New Town development thus changed what it meant to be a Frenchman and an inhabitant. The urbanism of "collective facilities"—urban amenities from shops to churches that were to be included in mass housing developments—became a key element of the state-led project to improve life in what was built. In a system in which production and consumption were separate yet interdependent realms, the question of how one could inform the other thus became crucial.

Concrete and Knowledge

During the postwar decades, new types of experts circulated in the hallways of government—not just in France—and the social sciences in particular grew exponentially, both within the state apparatus and in the academy.[22] While that development was certainly reinforced by Cold War politics and came to define the global influence of American social science, French social scientists were in the first place shaped by their own intellectual traditions. Even in

postwar France, however, the figure of the autonomous intellectual was increasingly replaced by that of the expert, a shift captured by Michel Foucault's notion of the "specific intellectual." No longer the intellectual of universal claims, the "master of truth and justice," this was the new knowledge producer who combined theory and practice by working in specific contexts.[23] Against the background of a decolonizing and rapidly urbanizing France, housing and urban development were particularly crucial fields for the development of this culture of expertise. French urbanists and social scientists had first encountered each other in the colonies, which since the late nineteenth century served as *champs d'expérience*, laboratories for controlled tests that could eventually be applied to France itself.[24] With the return of colonial administrators and their redeployment in French bureaucracy during the 1950s and 1960s, this experimental approach was now definitively folded back onto the metropole.

But in postwar France the intersection of architecture and social science was not just a matter of pragmatic state planning, of overcoming problems with the construction of housing estates or new neighborhoods. The relationship between built space and society was in fact one of the most fruitful themes in postwar French intellectual culture. In all its dimensions, whether in inner-city Paris or the country's mushrooming suburbs, urban space informed the work of thinkers and artists from a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives—from Situationist critiques of urban boredom to Jacques Tati's sterile world of glass and steel in *Playtime*. While such cultural production might seem far removed from the workings of government or the actual economic and political forces shaping the built environment, many intellectuals—Henri Lefebvre most famously—moved quite fluidly between avant-garde circles and the French state administration. Their work was often both critical of and instrumental to government planning and its consequences on the ground. Of these burgeoning intellectual cultures, sociology became increasingly central over the course of the postwar decades, as it promised access to the elusive realm of how built environments were actually "consumed."

Initially, however, that realm was practically irrelevant to state planners faced with the daunting task of rebuilding France during and after World War II. Their primary focus was on the scientific management of production. High-level civil servants, graduated from France's elite *grandes écoles* and hardened by wartime experience, made up a class of planning experts who cultivated technology as a means to achieve national modernization and reinstate French grandeur.[25] In the country's politically unstable climate of the immediate postwar decade, this elite of nonelected administrators was convinced that technology and applied science would transcend the deadlock of politics. This conviction—as old as Saint-Simonianism—set off an intellectual debate about technocracy, a term used pejoratively by opponents who considered it disregarding of human values.[26]

Such opposition, however, only disguised the formation of a shared culture of expertise. As the mind-set of national planning infiltrated large parts of the bureaucratic apparatus, the

French state became a knowledge-producing institution as much as an interventionist one. By the end of the 1950s, state planning included a range of social and cultural domains, and high-level administrators acknowledged the social sciences as key auxiliaries to political action and decision making. Such expertise included first of all economic science and demography, but increasingly also "softer" sciences such as geography and sociology. National economic planning gradually engaged these "human sciences," especially in growing policy areas such as education, public health, and housing. It was not that policy makers espoused science and technology to dissolve politics altogether, but rather that they aspired to a kind of objectivity that was modeled on the hard sciences. While some scientists overtly espoused political ideologies, the view that social science constituted a neutral form of expertise that could advance political decision making, if not overcome politics, was more common. The boundaries between technocracy and humanism were thus blurred at best.[27] This conflation was perhaps most pronounced in the realm of housing and urban policy, for which state administrators increasingly endorsed the use of social-scientific methods.[28] Initially, they prioritized economic and demographic methods, but what rose to become the legitimate domain of expertise about housing and urban planning was sociology. The construction of some of the first *grands ensembles* in the mid-1950s was in fact already accompanied by sociological inquiry, both independent and commissioned by the government. Although the sociologist Chombart de Lauwe was an absolute pioneer of this new field and Henri Lefebvre his most famous critic and successor, the role of social science in postwar urbanization—as that of architecture—cannot be understood through the work of a few "great men." France's centralized state apparatus channeled a massive, largely empirical and quasi-anonymous production of social science into its urban policies over the postwar decades.

Sociology is to be understood here not only as a purely academic discipline, but as a heterogeneous domain of expertise that far exceeded the initially weak and relatively uninstitutionalized discourse of theorists or academics at this time. What in postwar France was labeled sociology constituted a dispersed realm of knowledge production that included not only academic research, but also social work, popular studies, journalistic reportage, and, most important, a huge mass of government-commissioned studies. The latter were conducted by a burgeoning sector of semipublic and private *bureaux d'études*, research institutes and consultancy firms that had emerged in response to growing government demand for research, especially after 1958. Many housing projects functioned as life-sized laboratories under the scrutiny of social-scientific experts. They were experimental, not necessarily in the sense that they were innovative or radical, but in that their built form embodied hypotheses about everyday life and gave rise to a process of testing, evaluating, and adapting. Apartment layouts, housing blocks, public spaces, and collective amenities were revised and improved in subsequent projects, often on the basis of sociological models and observations of built projects.

Sociological expertise thus assumed a crucial role of mediation between what policy makers, developers, and architects produced in their offices and everyday life "on the ground."

French sociology grew up in the housing estates and New Towns of the postwar period. As these projects subjected everyday life to rationalization and modernization at an unprecedented scale, they became sociologists' quintessential barometer of French society. Their far-reaching effects on everyday life were accompanied by a conceptual revolution of what this realm was and could be. Henri Lefebvre's work—beginning with his 1947 *Critique de la vie quotidienne*—was at the forefront of a new generation who would turn everyday life into a fertile domain of sociological investigation.[29] The stakes were deemed high. While everyday life was seen as a victim of the alienating forces of capitalism and bureaucracy, and—following the fervent critiques of Guy Debord—of a consumer society that colonized it, it also harbored the seeds of change because critique could open it up to the authentic and the meaningful.

Meanwhile, architects did not remain at the sidelines. For an international avant-garde of architects and artists, the everyday had become a crucial vehicle to revise modernism for the postwar world. It allowed them to expand the principles of functionalism and to incorporate social life more directly into architectural design. The 1953 CIAM meeting in Aix-en-Provence, which signified the birth of Team X, was a landmark in this project, in which sociology was assigned a crucial role. In France, however, it was not Team X but the centralized state that figured as the primary meeting ground for sociology, architecture, and urbanism. From the mid-1960s on, work in multidisciplinary planning teams—most importantly for the *villes nouvelles*—allowed French architects and state planners to channel social and sociological critiques into new urban models, alternative to the *grands ensembles*. After the events of 1968, which "reintellectualized" French architectural culture and inspired a newly critical generation of architects, sociological ideas such as Lefebvre's notions of everyday life, appropriation, and the right to the city became staple references. Taken up by young collaborative architecture offices such as the Atelier de Montrouge and Atelier d'urbanisme et d'architecture, as well as younger state administrators, sociology was thus at once the main source for social critiques of urbanism and the instrument for generating new urban models. Although it proved impossible to effectively instrumentalize sociology for design, it provided architects and planners with a unique entryway into the practices of dwelling and with concrete design techniques such as "programming." Under the aegis of an increasingly self-critical state apparatus, the shift to new housing typologies and urban centers was only possible because of the insertion of sociological expertise in design. That would help architects and planners not only to instill citizen participation but also to entice consumers in novel ways. This development thus traverses what are conventionally understood as fundamentally opposing approaches to the city—modernist architecture and participatory planning.

Politics beyond Ideology

Sidestepping the dominant three-step narrative—with a first moment of architectural invention, a second one of massive construction, and a final one of contestation and crisis—the study examines processes of co-construction and the importance of *gradual* sociocultural change in the built environment. This reveals an alternative to the narrative of top-down power versus bottom-up revolt that has characterized many studies of postwar urbanization, especially in France.[30] As such, this study follows in the footsteps of Paul Rabinow's history of welfare as an essential component of French modernity.[31] Yet, contrary to the tendency in much Foucault-inspired scholarship to take this approach in a determinist direction, the study brings the notion of power closer to the ground by demonstrating the historical importance of a much larger set of actors and materials in shaping the built environment. That in turn allows for a contingent account of how historical change unfolds.

The fact that both the embrace of state-funded housing and calls for citizen participation cross the political spectrum in France reduces the explanatory force of political ideology. Left and Right were, of course, rarely in full agreement, but modern state-led urbanism was supported by both sides, be it in different ways and for different reasons. What for the Right could be a matter of economic rationality and national pride could be an issue of affordable housing and social solidarity to the Left. If politicians generally agreed about the virtues of mass collective housing in the 1950s and found themselves in agreement again when prohibiting such housing in the 1970s, how can this history be cast as primarily a matter of party politics or political ideology? This study traces the making and unmaking of such remarkable consensus by focusing on the built environment itself. Although in architectural discourse the lens of political ideology would suggest categorical oppositions—the Situationists' radical leftist critiques, for instance, as diametrically opposed to the bureaucratic architectural production of a right-wing state during the de Gaulle years—a closer look at the complex agency of architecture in the postwar city suspends such conventional registers.

Modern urbanism in France was politically eclectic, to say the least. At the level of the national government, big decisions were made by centrist and right-wing politicians, in particular after 1958 with the arrival of de Gaulle, for whom participation was primarily a matter of patriotism. At the same time, the urban policies of this government were developed by an elite of nonelected officials with left-leaning but hardly radical political agendas—not rarely social Catholics. On the local government level, the *grands ensembles* were enthusiastically received by Communist mayors, while conservative municipalities tended to resist them. The concentration of modern housing projects in the "red suburbs" of Paris is not an accident.[32] Yet many large-scale housing and urban projects across the nation were planned from offices in Paris. The *villes nouvelles* program was one such unmistakably Gaullist invention, drawn up

by nonelected technocrats against the demands of local government. Nevertheless, it was exactly in these New Town projects that sociology—surely more on the political Left than on the Right—inspired various New Town planners, whose political leanings were not often socialist. The architects they commissioned included an older, conservative generation of Beaux-Arts–trained architects as well as newly established offices of young radicals, many of whom had explicitly Communist affiliations. Moreover, the many programs and plans springing from specific political agendas at the national level were often transformed through local negotiation.

The emergence of participation in France is not a matter of one political ideology supplanting another but is part of a larger shift that confounds clear distinction between (right-wing) authoritarian planning and (left-wing) citizen empowerment. During the presidency of Giscard d'Estaing (1974–81), participation and quality of life became central preoccupations in architectural culture and urban policy. Yet these themes had been developing for more than two decades in what continues to be seen as the heyday of technocratic France.[33] Concerns with the recipients of mass housing did not first emerge from "the beach underneath the paving stones" after 1968, but as a part of these welfare state interventions themselves.[34] Similarly, the aesthetics of participation changed gradually from the modern to the postmodern: rather than being naturally opposite to the spatial homogeneity and visual repetition of midcentury modernism, participatory urbanism shifted over time to find its most "logical" expression in postmodern form, often recalling a preindustrial urban past. Most important, any a priori registers for understanding the politics or aesthetics of postwar architecture and urbanism were thrown off by the dynamics of a consumer society in which power also meant *purchasing power*. The latter constituted emerging forms of agency rarely acknowledged, yet increasingly of greater importance than those given by decree or demanded in protest. The proliferation of big-box shopping malls and predominance of the single-family home from the late 1960s onward, when a newly prosperous middle class could increasingly afford them, were clear signs of this emerging power threatening France's state-led urbanism. It is not surprising, then, that participation and lifestyle—or shared decision making and consumerism—were often conflated in urban and architectural debate during the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the *villes nouvelles* project.

Fueled by growing prosperity, expanding social welfare, and mass consumerism during the postwar decades, the understanding of what it meant to be an inhabitant gradually evolved from a uniform, passive beneficiary of public services to a diverse set of active participants and consumers of lifestyle. This shift in mind-set took place during the "long sixties," the period between the late 1950s and early 1970s that is usually described as one of prosperity and relative stability, at least within the borders of the French metropole. This account thus contributes to recent scholarship, which has revised the dominant idea that the years between

Liberation and the economic downturn of the mid-1970s constituted a coherent period distinguished from the turbulence of World War II and the economic and social uncertainties after 1975. While some scholars, Philip Nord most recently, have traced the French postwar welfare state back to the 1930s and thus refute the idea that World War II introduced an absolute break, others, such as Rosemary Wakeman, have distinguished the 1940s and early 1950s as a quiet period distinct from the rapid urban modernization after the mid-1950s.[35]

Rather than challenging the bookends of the period, this study demonstrates crucial *qualitative* changes at the heart of the *trente glorieuses*. These changes do not correspond to political events, such as the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, but rather to the insidious transformations of everyday life in a country faced with unprecedented economic growth. Mass production based on the uniform consumption of material goods was increasingly subjected to diversification geared toward the consumption of lifestyle. The evolution from the mass urbanism of the first *grands ensembles* in the late 1950s to the branding of the *villes nouvelles* as showcases for new urban lifestyles little more than a decade later was an important factor of this dynamic. In France and many other countries, that shift took place under the aegis of a centralized state, which liberalized but by no means retreated. Liberalization in many ways meant privatization, which affected not only state-owned industries and the financial sector but also housing development. And with the privatization of housing, from real-estate development to individual home ownership, came marketing. In an increasingly prosperous France, individual families amassed savings that allowed them to act as middle-class consumers on the housing market. Developers both anticipated and tapped into this evolution by creating new housing products and shopping experiences, in which lifestyle became dominant.

This evolution of French dwelling culture was not just a factor of the market; it was also facilitated by a dynamic interplay between social contestation and state action. Critiques of state-led urbanism ran parallel to its historic development. While the *grands ensembles* helped to overcome the housing shortage and were celebrated by many as the advent of modern living and social progress, they were also criticized from day one. Some journalists reported nothing less than a moral panic, local associations and civil society organizations broadcast inhabitants' discontents, and sociologists formulated problems and solutions based on their extensive surveys. Especially after 1958, with Pierre Sudreau's tenure as minister of construction, the government took an active interest in these critiques. State administrators commissioned studies in order to understand and overcome what they saw as potential resistance to unquestionably benevolent modernization. They often took such critiques to heart in order to improve people's experience of the modernization process, making the centralized state not only a self-justifying but also a self-criticizing institution. That process led to a continual tweaking of design doctrines during the 1960s, but it was only after the social contestation of May 1968 that profound changes were proffered. That period's critiques of state capitalism—focused on

the alienation of everyday life, the lack of participation, freedom, and creativity—were subsequently harnessed in new design and development strategies.[36] But not just private enterprise capitalized on critique. The well-known denunciations of government capitalism voiced by the Situationists in the late 1950s were rapidly recuperated by that same government after 1968 and informed new "user-oriented" approaches to state-led urban development during the 1970s.

Only in the mid-1970s did the French government finally shift away from large-scale housing production and a new regime of fully privatized housing development begin. The reasons were not altogether internal. The French economy was already showing signs of change and trouble by the late 1960s, but the oil crisis of 1973 sealed the end of the country's postwar golden age.[37] The Guichard directive, the official death knell for the *grands ensembles*, was signed earlier that year. It signified the official abandonment of the kind of urbanism that had guided a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing France. Meanwhile, participation and lifestyle—first tested in that same kind of urbanism during the 1960s—came to reign supreme in the private urban developments of the decades to come. Seemingly emerged from the ashes of a withering welfare state, this mind-set came in fact directly from the culture of the French welfare state itself, at the height of its success. By promoting active participation, free agency, and the consumption of lifestyle, government-led late-modern urbanism in France thus helped shape the social imaginary of the era that would follow. Despite the potentials of state-sponsored critique, these new approaches failed to arrest the logic of uneven development that ultimately shaped France's suburban crisis up until today. While the effort to attract middle-class families with images of new urban lifestyles intensified in the *villes nouvelles*, such families moved out of collective housing projects in increasing numbers, leaving large swaths of older, less desirable housing gradually to the immigrant poor.[38] The building boom stopped, and when it picked up again after the crises of the mid-1970s it was no longer in the form of "projects" but rather single-family homes. Expertise nevertheless continued to proliferate, but it would now be put to use not to build a social vision but to fix the "problem of the *banlieue*."[39]

Structure of the Book

The book's narrative unfolds in three parts. The first part, "1950s: Projects in the Making," examines how an unprecedented regime of mass housing production took shape in response to acute housing needs after World War II and throughout the 1950s. Chapter 1 describes why housing policies privileging industrialized production methods, large sites, and modern architectural forms came to prevail and how such policies entered into the purview of national modernization. The result was a new mode of development epitomized by the *grands*

ensembles—mass housing estates on large, consolidated areas often at the peripheries of existing cities. Chapter 2 examines how a bureaucratic epistemology emerged in correspondence with the mushrooming of new housing developments. Domestic and community life became a central focus in the attempts of architects, planners, policy makers, and especially social scientists to satisfy housing needs for French working- and middle-class nuclear families. Social science—shifting from the quantitative approach of economists and demographers to the qualitative research of urban sociologists—developed in relation to in the housing projects it both analyzed and helped create. It became central to a new machinery of knowledge production for which the centralized state served as primary platform.

The second part, "1960s: Architecture Meets Social Science," analyzes how mass housing production—a regime that produced knowledge as much as buildings—shaped architectural and social experimentation in the French suburbs during the "long sixties." Fueled by rising prosperity, mass consumerism, and the expansion of social welfare, the idea of overcoming the perceived shortcomings of mass housing increasingly dominated political and architectural discourse. Inhabitants expected to be addressed increasingly as active individuals rather than passive or uniform beneficiaries. This informed the continual revision of mass housing and the French New Town projects. Architecture and social science met at a time when intellectuals from many stripes read urban space as the barometer of contemporary culture and society. They engaged in particularly productive exchange around the notion of *animation*, the discourse of participation, and the approach to programming. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the social and political ambition to "animate" the *grands ensembles* shaped their planning and design. Experts and policy makers understood *animation* as a social and technical approach to create liveliness and foster community life in newly built and often large-scale housing areas. While that was initially seen as a matter of providing the right kind and number of collective facilities following the *grille Dupont*, architecture and urban design played an increasingly important role as modernist principles were gradually reoriented toward community and street life. Chapter 4 examines the development of citizen participation in French planning and architecture. Focusing on Sarcelles, a notorious housing project that served as a major laboratory for this development, it demonstrates how calls for inhabitant participation coincided with a surge in sociological and architectural expertise. Such expertise was subsequently harnessed in housing projects such as Villeneuve in Grenoble, whose brutalist aesthetics correlated with participatory aspirations. Chapter 5 investigates the method of *programmation* in the planning and design of the *villes nouvelles* or French New Towns. In the context of the city, *programmation* or "programming" referred to ways of spatially organizing and relating a mix of urban functions and activities. The social critiques of the late 1960s infused the work of multidisciplinary teams with a sociological sensibility in which city building was increasingly thought of as a science of programming.

The third part, "1970s: Consuming Contradictions," describes the turning point away from public housing and toward private development during the 1970s. The cusp and decline of France's regime of housing production and experimentation were epitomized by extravagant large-scale urban projects and alternative housing types. Chapter 6 focuses on the making of new urban centers—a crucial component of *villes nouvelles* planning—in the sprawling suburbs of the Paris region. Designed with modern consumers in mind, these giant megastructures-in-denial integrated a vast number of commercial and residential functions in an attempt to re-create urban density and centrality in the metropolitan sprawl. Their designers were inspired by the popular success of privately developed shopping malls, which proliferated rapidly in the 1960s. Yet that very success became a major cause in the decline of what were ultimately inflexible and often very costly urban projects. Chapter 7 focuses on the development of alternative housing models such as flexible dwelling *(habitat évolutif)* and intermediary housing *(habitat intermédiaire)*, which were meant to combine qualities of single-family home living with the economies of scale in mass production. These ultimate projects of French welfare's golden age were cut short by financial trouble at mid-decade. Yet, increasing discontents with mass housing, privatization, and the gradual rise of middle-class prosperity and residential mobility had already undermined their success. More flexible private developments—both housing and commercial—picked up in response to the volatile agency of individuals as private consumers. They had a fundamentally different suburban logic. Both government and the field of architecture lost their role as a primary force in urban development and the expertise of dwelling. The single-family home became the dominant model, and the user lived on as the contemporary consumer.

The conclusion explores how this history shapes our understanding of architecture's social ambitions today. It contextualizes the predominant understanding of the social in negative terms, as a result of changing housing policies and the shift toward private housing development. Finally, it discusses the book's main findings in light of the concealment of architecture's social project in postmodernism from the 1970s onward and the reemergence of social engagement in architecture and urbanism today.